The subjective conditions of human morality

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Chapter 3

Kant's Conception of Moral Strength

Abstract

Kant's conception of moral strength is central to his understanding of virtue. And yet, the role of Kantian moral strength remains elusive. Most Kant scholars seem to assume that we need moral strength only when it comes to acting in accordance with our established maxims. However, accounts based on this assumption can be challenged by Kant's claim that virtue, as moral strength of the human will, can never become a mere habit because its maxims must be freely adopted in new situations. Even some accounts that are not based on this assumption fail to meet this challenge. By drawing on my earlier interpretation of the two intimately related levels of the Kantian capacity for self-control, I now propose a twofold account, which can accommodate Kant's point that moral maxims of virtue must always be freely adopted. Reading moral strength as the proper exercise of the capacity for self-control makes it possible to argue that moral strength is necessary not only for compelling ourselves to follow maxims by realizing ends but also for setting ourselves moral ends by adopting moral maxims.

3.1 Introduction

Kant's notion of moral strength is central to his understanding of virtue. Kant argues that virtue signifies "a moral strength of the human will [*eine moralische Stärke des Willens*]" (MM 6: 405), and that it can be understood as a continuous process of acquiring moral strength (MM 6: 397). Moreover, he defines virtue as "the moral strength of a *human being's* will in fulfilling his duty [*in Befolgung seiner Pflicht*]" (MM 6: 405), as "the strength of a human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty [*in Befolgung seiner Pflicht*]" (MM 6: 394), and as "the strength of intention [*die Stärke des Vorsatzes*]" (MM 6: 390).[1] Finally, even those definitions of virtue in which he does not mention the term "strength" seem to presuppose the idea that we ought to acquire moral strength. Consider, for instance, Kant's claim that virtue is "moral disposition in struggle" (C2 5: 84) and moral self-constraint (e.g. MM 6: 381–3).

Kant's conception of moral strength remains elusive, however. How are we precisely to understand moral strength of will, or the strength of our maxims in fulfilling or following (*Befolgung*) our duties? Is it here implied that we need moral strength only when it comes to following our moral maxims, or realizing moral ends simply by performing certain actions? Or is moral strength also required in the process of adopting these maxims and setting ourselves those ends that are at the same time duties? Is the intention the strength of which is properly called virtue (MM 6: 390) a mere intention to follow our established maxims, or is it at the same time a necessary aspect of establishing these very maxims? And if so, how? Although crucial for attaining a fuller understanding Kant's conception of virtue, these questions have not been explicitly addressed in the secondary literature thus far.

Most Kant scholars seem to assume, often tacitly, that we need moral strength only when it comes to following already-established maxims. They maintain that moral strength is not directly involved in the process of adopting moral maxims. As I shall indicate, there is some textual evidence in support of this interpretation, but it also has its own pitfalls. It easily leads to acceptance of the controversial point that Kantian virtue is chiefly about compelling ourselves to perform certain actions. Acceptance of

1 See also A 7: 147; MM 6: 392, 6: 447; LE 27: 456, 27: 465, 27: 492, 27: 570–1, 27: 662. In the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, "Vorsatz" is usually translated as "resolution" and "intention". In my opinion, both terms, albeit in slightly different ways, capture Kant's points regarding virtue. I also find the word "intent" well suited because it can signify a morally acceptable motive for performing a good action. For the sake of clarity, I shall use one term – namely "intention" – and I shall often use the term "resolution" for "Entschließung". In addition, I find "intention" more suitable for several reasons. For example, since Kant also uses the word "strength" in this context, it seems that by the strength of intention he has in mind a kind of sticking to our general commitment to the moral law by *renewing* our more general moral intention (*Absicht*) in new situations.

this point in turn prevents us from properly elucidating the difference between duties of virtue and duties of right. Namely, it forces us to say that the fulfilment of duties of virtue merely involves compelling ourselves to perform certain actions, as opposed to constraining ourselves in the process of maxim adoption. Furthermore, the point that moral strength is merely necessary when it comes to following maxims seems to rest on the presupposition that we have a kind of fixed set of adopted maxims in advance, which we apply to new situations simply as they are. And this presupposition admits of a kind of static account of maxim adoption, which makes it hard to make sense of Kant's insistence that maxims are in an unending progress (C2 5: 32–33) and that virtue "can never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all" (MM 6: 409).

There are also accounts of virtue as moral strength which fare better in this regard, for they do not seem to be based on the assumption that moral strength can only be expressed at the level of maxim observation. An example of this is Jeanine Grenberg's (2010) account, but even this does not fully clarify whether, and how, moral strength might be necessary for the adoption of moral maxims of virtue or maxims of ends. The crucial link between the strength of intention characteristic of virtue and the idea of setting ourselves moral ends remains vague.[2]

Having outlined key readings of moral strength (*Section 2*), I highlight the link between moral strength and moral ends by analysing Kant's treatment of moral strength as a proper exercise of our capacity for self-control (*Section 3*). In doing so, I draw on my earlier account of the two intimately related levels of the capacity for self-control in order to propose a twofold account according to which moral strength is necessary not only for compelling ourselves to realize moral ends but also for setting ourselves moral ends.

3.2 Kantian Moral Strength Thus Far

Although there is textual evidence in favour of the claim that Kant understands virtue as the moral strength of self-control, the nature of virtue as moral strength is usually not explained as a proper exercise of the capacity for self-control. A telling example is Richard McCarty's account of moral strength, which even appears to exclude such an explanation. McCarty (2009: 192; 223; 229) points out that Kant uses the term "moral strength" to refer to virtue as a psychological condition. Additionally, he claims that virtue in this sense is the same as virtue in the formal sense (McCarty 2009: 196).

2 Grenberg helpfully touches upon the close connection between moral strength of virtue and the activity of constraining ourselves to adopt moral ends, but she does not discuss this issue in relation to the adoption of maxims.

In his words, "a person's formal virtue is just the strength of her moral incentive, and the variability of this strength, from person to person, accounts from personal differences in this conception of virtue" (McCarty 2009: 230). McCarty (2009: 230) adds that everyone possesses virtue in this sense. On his view, moral strength seems to be the psychological force of the moral incentive that all of us *happen* to have. Kant's notion of moral strength is then tailored to fit McCarty's defence of the two-world interpretation, in which moral strength seems to belong to the psychologically deterministic world. Making the effort to acquire moral strength by properly excising our capacity for self-control does not seem to fit this picture.

Paul Guyer (2000) does not discuss moral strength in relation to self-control either. He seems to claim that moral strength is a kind of causally produced mental state, or a mere 'final product' which is not required for *becoming* morally motivated. On his interpretation, moral strength is a caused product of inner freedom; as such, it is just one of the three different senses in which Kant uses the term "virtue".[3] Guyer's (2000: 304; 307) point is that virtue in the sense of moral strength is *caused* by virtue in the sense of virtuous disposition. To explain how he understands this "causal relation", he writes that virtue as moral strength is grounded in the motive of respect for the moral law; virtue as moral strength results from the act of inner freedom, which is to be understood as "an agent's adoption of respect for the moral law as his fundamental maxim" (Guyer 2000: 307). Virtue as moral strength appears merely to be a kind of 'final product' of already-acquired inner freedom.

Finally, Jeanine Grenberg (2010: 165) interprets moral strength as "the realization of inner freedom", understood as a kind of keen "attentiveness" to the moral law by which we realize that we have moral obligations. She also does not base her interpretation on Kant's notion of moral self-control.

A notable exception is Anne Margaret Baxley's helpful reading, according to which moral strength is the strength of the executive power of the will, or the strength of the power of self-control, which should not be equated with the legislative power. According to Baxley (2010: 60), the legislative power is "a prior condition" for acquiring the "executive strength of will". She hereby commits herself to the view that self-control, as the executive power that is central to virtue, is not needed for self-legislation.

Consequently, Baxley's approach to moral strength leaves out the level of self-control required for the adoption of moral maxims. On her view, the *role* of moral strength comes into play only once we have adopted moral maxims. As she explains, moral strength is required "to enforce the morally good choices we legislate to ourselves

3 The other two senses are virtue as virtuous disposition and virtue as self-constraint.

as autonomous rational agents" (Baxley 2010: 57). Moral strength of will comes into play once the task of self-legislation has been properly fulfilled – it enables firm stability in the observation of already-adopted maxims.[4]

The literature also contains an alternative view according to which acquisition of moral strength takes place before we adopt moral maxims. Grenberg interestingly proposes that we acquire moral strength via "attentiveness" to the moral law, which occurs "via the moral feeling of respect" (Grenberg 2010: 164). This is how she reads Kant's idea that we acquire moral strength through "contemplation [*Betrachtung* (*contemplatione*)]" (MM 6: 397). She argues that it is by engaging in contemplation that we strengthen our moral feeling, through which we then see ourselves as morally obligated beings. On her view, we seem to acquire moral strength simply by becoming aware of the demands of the moral law. Grenberg's story about the activity of acquiring moral strength seems to describe what happens before we adopt our maxims.

Finally, we also find in the literature the radical claim that moral strength sometimes plays no role at all, such that we can act virtuously without it. For instance, Robert Johnson and Adam Cureton (2017) argue that it is possible for an agent to act from duty, even repeatedly and reliably, while all the while lacking moral strength because he might simply fail to encounter any temptation. On this view, moral strength does not appear to be essential to virtue.

Although initially appealing, the idea that acting virtuously does not *always* require the strength of moral self-control is inconsistent with Kant's stern view that that acting virtuously must always be equated with acting from duty. For example, it might seem plausible to hold that an agent does not have to control himself to perform a beneficent action when he is inclined to help someone. Nevertheless, Kant's view seems to be that, even in this case, an agent must control himself not to perform a morally good action from his natural inclination to help. Otherwise, his action will lack moral worth – he will let this inclination determine his choice by incorporating it into his maxim as his main incentive. As Kant explains, "beneficence is the maxim of making others' happiness one's own end, and the duty to it consists in the subject's being constrained by his reason to adopt this maxim as a universal law" (MM 6: 452). If we are to fulfil the duty of beneficence, we must control or constrain ourselves by adopting a maxim of helping others because of the moral end of increasing their happiness: we must set ourselves this moral end by adopting a moral maxim. Thus, even an inclination that

4 At times, Baxley toys with the idea that moral strength is necessary for more than the observation of moral maxims, for instance when she associates moral strength with maintaining "a firm moral disposition" (Baxley 2010: 61). However, her account of the autonomy-autocracy distinction in terms of the legislative-executive distinction seems to prevent her from developing this idea further.

does not seem to oppose performing a morally good action can be seen as an obstacle to morality that we must overcome. Moral strength is then always needed if we are to act virtuously, or to perform an action from the motive of duty.

Although to a different extent, the above interpretations of the nature and role of Kantian moral strength fail to accommodate Kant's general insistence that virtue, as *moral strength* of the human will and maxims, should never become a habit (A 7: 147) because its maxims should always be *freely* adopted:

> [V]irtue can never settle down in peace and quiet with its maxims adopted once and for all […]. For moral maxims, unlike technical ones, cannot be based on habit [*Gewohnheit*] (since this belongs to the natural constitution of the will's determination); on the contrary, if the practice of virtue were to become a habit the subject would suffer loss to that freedom in adopting maxims which distinguishes an action done from duty. (MM 6: 409)

If understood in the proposed ways, moral strength can hardly be something the acquisition of which enables the free adoption of virtuous maxims in ever-new situations. It is easy to see that this passage cannot be accommodated by the view according to which virtue as moral strength amounts to compelling ourselves to adhere to our moral maxims; what is more, though, Grenberg's reading of virtue as moral strength also seems to face this problem. Lurking behind her interesting account is still a tendency towards a passive and static account of moral strength, for her account seems to fall short when it comes to explaining the role of contemplation in the process of moral maxim adoption and indicating how the activity of contemplation develops over time.[5] Without an explanation of how we adopt maxims by acquiring moral strength in ever-new situations, we fail to appreciate the essential *active* and *dynamic* aspect of moral strength of the human will.

I believe that we can avoid this problem by fully capturing Kant's conception of moral strength, but only if we base our analysis of moral strength on Kant's notion of moral self-control, which also accommodates the role of self-control at the level of maxim adoption. As will become clear, moral strength comes into play not only after we have adopted our moral maxims but also in the *process* of adopting them. Interpreting moral strength as the proper exercise of our capacity for self-control paves the way to an account of moral strength of the human will, which can accommodate Kant's insistence that maxims of virtue must be adopted in new situations independently of the influ-

5 In a similar vein, Mavis Biss (2015: 9) argues that Grenberg "does not indicate how the efficacy of one's contemplative activity may build over time".

ence of our inclinations. Additionally, treating moral strength as the strength of moral self-control can also help us to clarify the necessary role played by moral strength when it comes to following maxims.

3.3 A Twofold Account of Moral Strength

In his notes to the *Doctrine of Virtue* (23: 394), Kant writes that moral strength is strength of *intention* (*Vorsatz)* and strength in acting (*That*). Expanding on this claim, I shall propose my own reading of Kantian moral strength. In my view, strength of intention, essential to Kantian virtue, must also be strength in compelling ourselves to form an intention by which we, in ever-new situations, set ourselves moral ends; as such, this intention is constitutive of our maxims of virtue, or maxims of ends (MM 6: 480; 6: 395).[6] By strength in acting I mean consistency in compelling ourselves to perform actions by which we adhere to our moral maxims. This aspect of moral strength is necessary for the realization of moral ends.

3.3.1 Strength in Acting – Acquired via Cultivation

Kant's recurring remark that moral strength concerns following our duties calls for an explanation of virtue as the strength needed for bridging the wide gap between maxim and deed.[7] Kantian moral strength certainly covers acting in accordance with our moral maxims – it is certainly about being sufficiently strong in realizing moral ends by performing certain actions on the basis of certain maxims.[8]

We can take care of following our maxims by increasing our own natural perfection, i.e. by cultivating our capacities "for furthering ends set forth by reason" (MM 6: 391). Natural perfection entails the cultivation of one's natural powers as means for all sorts of possible ends (MM 6: 444). This applies not only to moral ends but also to merely pragmatic ends; Kant's point is that we also cultivate our natural capacities in order to use them as means for realizing those ends that can help us to achieve the moral ones (MM 6: 392).

But the question is what Kant's notion of *cultivation* precisely involves. On my view, cultivation involves the proper development of our capacity for self-control. The lecture notes tell us that Kant thought that the cultivation of our capacities, by which

6 For valuable discussions of maxims of virtue and Kant's understanding of moral ends, see Onora O'Neill (1998) and Andreas Trampota (2013).

7 See: MM 6: 394; 6: 405; A 7: 147 and R 6: 47.

8 See R 6: 45n.

we achieve moral ends, belongs to the duty to govern ourselves (*sich selbst zu regieren*) (LE 27: 627), and Kant argues that it is through this self-governing activity that we gain control over all of our capacities and inclinations (MM 6: 408).[9]

To demonstrate how we cultivate our capacities by properly exercising the capacity for self-control, I shall focus on the cultivation of our "capacity [*Fähigkeit*] for having pleasure and displeasure in representation", a capacity also called "*feeling* [*Gefühl*]" (MM 6: 211). In doing so, I shall show that even cultivation of the capacity for feeling can be read as the activity of acquiring the strength of moral self-control, and that this reading can highlight the point of intersection between the two aspects of moral strength.

Kant's oft-discussed passage concerning our indirect duty to cultivate our natural compassionate feelings is a good starting point:

> But while it is not in itself a duty to share the sufferings (as well as the joys) of others, it is a duty to actively sympathize [*thätige Theilnehmung*] in their fate; and to this end it is therefore an indirect duty to cultivate [*cultiviren*] the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings [*die mitleidige natürliche (ästhetische) Gefühle*] in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feelings appropriate to them. – It is therefore a duty not to avoid the places where the poor who lack the most basic necessities are to be found, but rather to seek them out, and not to shun sickrooms or debtor's prisons and so forth in order to avoid sharing painful feelings one may not be able to resist. For this is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty would not alone accomplish. (MM 6: 457; translation modified)

Cultivation of our natural compassionate feelings is usually understood as involving a kind of intentional self-exposure to scenes of human misery, which is not directly related to self-control.[10] However, by treating cultivation as a process of acquiring self-control, as I shall elaborate shortly, we see that cultivation is not simply about eliciting certain feelings by exposing ourselves to such scenes. By shedding new light on the nature of cultivation, this treatment also solves key interpretative difficulties regarding its function.

9 The lecture notes also suggest that Kant maintains that self-control in this sense is a subjective condition of the performance of duties to ourselves, and therefore of all other duties (LE 27: 360; 364; 368).

10 See, for instance, Paul Guyer (2010: 146–7), Nancy Sherman (1990: 158–9) and Randy Cagle (2005: 458).

To my knowledge, only Marcia Baron (1995: 214–220) touches upon the link between cultivation and self-control. Nevertheless, even on her view, cultivation simply "entails seeking out situations that will elicit such feelings", and it is meant to presuppose the activity of controlling our feelings (Baron 1995: 217). Baron's (1995: 220) point is that proper cultivation of the feelings that are *already* under our control can make us more sensitive to situations when our help is needed. If cultivated, these feelings can help us to notice when someone needs help.[11]

In my terminology, Baron's claim is that cultivation of our sympathetic impulses can only help us to attain moral ends. It cannot be required for setting ourselves moral ends, for that, as she nicely frames it, would amount to the cultivation of an impure will. In her excellent discussion of the problem of how to interpret our duty to cultivate our sympathetic impulses so that it fits with Kant's rigid stance on impurity, she stresses that it cannot be the case that we have to fulfil this duty in order to secure a source of motivation in addition to the motive of duty. Baron holds that Kant's claim that nature has implanted in us such impulses "to do what the representation of duty would not alone accomplish" (MM 6: 457) can be read simply as saying that a proper cultivation of these impulses can help us to realize moral ends.[12]

I agree with Baron that the cultivation of our natural compassionate feelings is necessary if we are to attain moral ends, and that these feelings, once they are cultivated, should not be understood as an additional source of moral motivation. Furthermore, I also think we should clarify why Kant suggests both that we ought to disregard these feelings while adopting moral maxims and that we ought to intensify them by visiting sickrooms and the like. Indeed, the problem is that these feelings, which are generally presented as obstacles at the level of maxim adoption, now require intensification because they are meant to be aids to acting morally.

Nonetheless, I still hold that Baron's account does not fully capture the nature of cultivation and its function. The cultivation of our natural compassionate feelings must involve more than merely exposing ourselves to situations in which our natural compassionate feelings will be intensified or elicited; it must involve the activity of controlling 'our sensitive intake' in such situations. Were we, as Baron (1995: 220) suggests, to cultivate just those feelings that are already under our control, we would be cultivating not our natural feelings but rather refined versions of them – that is, feelings that have already been modified because of our capacity of self-control.

Furthermore, cultivation of these feelings can also be necessary for following maxims in a way not suggested by Baron. When Kant advises us to cultivate our natural compassionate feelings by visiting places of human misery, I take him to mean that we

11 In a similar vein, Sherman (1990: 158) argues that sympathy and compassion "enable us to apply moral principles by alerting us to circumstances that have a moral dimension and may require moral action".

12 Baron hereby argues against Allison's view. For a fuller version of her interesting critique, see Baron (1993).

ought to intensify these feelings up to the point that they do not overwhelm us. That is, we ought to cultivate or develop our natural compassionate feelings by controlling them, so that they do not turn into affects, or intense feelings that overpower us. Since affects paralyze us, they cannot serve us as means to efficiently following our maxims. They cannot help us to realize moral ends.

On my view, cultivation is at base the *activity* of acquiring the *strength* of self-control by "abstracting from" certain sensible impressions or by disregarding them. When cultivating our natural compassionate feelings, we actually exercise and develop our capacity for self-control not simply by compelling ourselves to visit places of human misery but also by controlling the influence of forceful sensible impressions on our minds in such situations.

As Kant argues, the indirect duty to cultivate our natural compassionate feelings is not simply a duty to share in the suffering of others (MM 6: 457) – "allowing oneself to be affected in a merely passive way, is silly and childish" (A 7:236). If, for example, I cannot alleviate someone's suffering, then I should not let myself "be infected [*anstecken*] by his pain (though my imagination)", for in doing so I would only increase the amount of suffering in the world by making myself suffer too (MM 6: 457). Kant thought that one suffers with others by means of the power of imagination (A 7: 238–9). In this case, I therefore ought to control my power of imagination, which synthesizes various impressions that sensible objects impose on me. In this way I can avoid being weak in the situation, or I can strengthen my natural sympathetic feelings further by cultivating or gaining control over my sympathetic power of imagination (A 7: 179; 7: 203).

Hence, the duty to cultivate certain natural feelings requires not that we become indifferent to all suffering but rather that we develop or strengthen these feelings so that they cannot affect us against our will. A kind of equanimity (*Gleichmüthigkeit*) is therefore required: by disregarding certain sensible impressions in ever-new situations, we can choose not to become a plaything of our feelings. This is why Kant argues that sensitivity (*Empfindsamkeit*), unlike the *weakness* of sentimentality (*Empfindelei*), is not opposed to this kind of equanimity: sensitivity "is a *capacity* [*Vermögen*] and a *strength* [*Stärke*], which either permits or prevents the states of both pleasure and displeasure from entering the mind" (A 7: 236; translation modified).

This reading supports the conclusion that fulfilling the indirect duty to cultivate our natural compassionate feelings plays a necessary role not only in facilitating the very actions by which we alleviate others' suffering but also in our ability to fulfil the duty to "sympathize actively" with the fate of others (MM 6: 457) – a duty which demands not only effectiveness in the performance of certain actions but also effectiveness in the adoption of moral maxims. When cultivated, our natural compassionate feelings, as Kant suggests, are "means to sympathy based on moral principles [*Theilnehmung aus moralischen Grundsätzen*]" (MM 6: 457). Cultivated sympathetic feelings can therefore be means to facilitate both the performance of certain actions once we have adopted

moral maxims and the adoption of virtuous maxims themselves. Whenever we let our sympathetic feelings turn into affects, we render ourselves incapable of free reflection, and therefore also incapable of the adoption of moral maxims of virtue. The cultivation of sympathetic feelings, then, serves as a kind of preparatory ground for this adoption.

If seen from this perspective, the threat of cultivating an impure will disappears even if we do not follow Baron's reading of Kant's claim that nature has implanted in us sympathetic impulses "to do what the representation of duty alone would not accomplish" (MM 6: 457). Cultivation seems to serve a further function that escapes her notice: our cultivated sympathetic feelings can also be means to maxim adoption, such that they need not be understood as sources of motivation in addition to the representation of duty.

Generally, the activity of disregarding the influences of sensible impressions, or the activity by which we cultivate our feelings, may also be directly involved in the process of adopting moral maxims on which we really act. Through this activity, we also seem to cultivate or strengthen *moral feelings*, but this cultivation requires that we take a step further by disregarding all sensible impressions. Through this abstracting activity all feelings arising from sensible impressions lose their influence, and moral feeling becomes more powerful (MM 6: 408). The cultivation of our natural susceptibility to moral feeling might then also be understood as an aspect of acquiring control over the condition of certain representations in our minds. In a calm state of mind, moral feeling, as the genuine moral motive, thus gains its full motivational strength; as I shall explain, we then adopt moral maxims of virtue or maxims that are effective in practice.[13]

We enter into this calm state of mind by fulfilling the duty of apathy, and Kant argues that virtue necessarily presupposes *apathy* as *strength* (MM 6: 408). But Kant also holds that virtue is a kind of government that surpasses the fulfilment of the duty of apathy (MM 6: 408). Accordingly, he emphasizes that "true strength" of virtue is not only "a tranquil mind [*das Gemüth in Ruhe*]" but also "a considered and firm resolution [*einer überlegten und festen Entschließung*] to put the law of virtue into practice" (MM 6: 409). As such, the account just given does not yet provide a full picture of moral strength.

13 Moral strength, then, cannot be a kind of psychological condition that we all simply have, as McCarty (2009) seems to suggest. It is rather a matter of effort.

3.3.2 Virtue as the Strength of Intention

A. Why Not Only the Strength of Intention to Follow Established Maxims?

As noted above, some Kant scholars hold that we only need moral strength to compel ourselves to follow established maxims. On their interpretative frameworks, a specifically virtuous intention must be read as a kind of firm intention to consistently perform actions in accordance with one's already adopted maxims. The underlying presupposition seems to be that we have a prepared set of maxims, some of which we simply 'take off the shelf' and apply to real-life situations.

Understanding Kantian strength of intention in this way makes it very hard to account for Kant's idea that maxims of virtue must be freely adopted in different situations – that they cannot be adopted once and for all, because that would make virtue a mere habit. Such understanding cannot accommodate Kant's claim that virtue can never turn into a "mechanical" habit or a kind of skill that is determined by natural necessity.

For sure, Kantian virtue cannot be reduced to mere *habitual acting*. Forming a habit (*Angewöhnung*), as Kant describes it, is establishing "a lasting inclination apart from any maxim, through frequently repeated gratification of that inclination"; he then adds that this kind of habit is more "a mechanism of a way of sensing [*ein Mechanism der Sinnesart*]" than a way of thinking (*Denkungsart*) (MM 6: 479). If understood in this way, habit might be equivalent to acting from an immediate inclination, which Kant distinguishes from acting on a maxim based on the interest of inclination in the *Groundwork* (4: 397).

But this is not the only ground for Kant's rejection of the model of virtue as "a long-standing *habit* [*Gewohnheit*] of morally good actions acquired through practice" (MM 6: 383). Defining virtue as the skill of consistently acting in accordance with a set of previously-established moral maxims is also problematic, for Kant's main objection seems instead to be that a *habitual* way of thinking also cannot serve as the essence of virtue. The way of thinking characteristic of virtue, or the way of thinking according to moral laws (*der Denkungsart nach moralischen Gesetzen*) (C2 5: 160), should never become habitual. It requires that we abstract from *all* natural determinations in ever-new situations, for it is the way of thinking by which we determine ourselves "to act through the thought of the law" (MM 6: 407).

Accordingly, Kant argues that virtue as moral strength cannot even be the kind of willing expressed in the sentence: "I will [*will*] this, because duty commands it" (A 7: 147; translation modified) if this willing is understood as "a certain degree of will, acquired through the frequently repeated use of one's capacity" (A 7: 147; translation modified):

> Therefore one cannot explain *virtue* as *skill* [*Fertigkeit*] in free lawful actions, for then it would be a mere mechanism of applying power [*blos Mechanism der Kraftanwendung*]. Rather, virtue is *moral strength* in adherence to one's duty [*in Befolgung seiner Pflicht*], which never should become habit [*Gewohnheit*] but should always emerge entirely new and original from one's way of thinking [*immer ganz neu und ursprünglich aus der Denkungsart hervorgehen soll*]. (A 7: 147)

Here, Kant contrasts virtue as *moral strength* with the mere skill of compelling ourselves to consistently perform certain actions. This skill may even involve "a certain degree of will[ing]" to act as the moral imperative demands, but the problem is that this kind of willing still amounts to "a mere mechanism of applying power". It is still determined by our natural impulses, so that it can never become more than a habitual sensible desire. For this reason, Kant argues that virtue, as *moral strength* in following our duty, should never become a habit. This can be avoided only by repeatedly compelling ourselves to adopt the maxims of virtue, or maxims of ends.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant is willing to define virtue as a moral or "*free* skill [*eine freie Fertigkeit* (*habitus libertatis*)]" (MM 6: 407), but the core of his argument for why virtue cannot be a mere habit is the same: we would then have to embrace the unacceptable claim that virtue results from natural necessity. Virtue would be a kind of "mechanism" that is "neither armed for all situations nor adequately secured against the changes that new temptations could bring about" (MM 6: 384). For these reasons, virtue must be "the effect of considered, *firm* and *continually purified principles* [*Grundsätze*]" (MM 6: 384; italics mine). This is why it can be understood as a kind of skill only if we add the adjective "free". As a free skill, virtue involves adopting moral maxims or *freely* determining our choice in ever-new situations (MM 6: 409).

Were we to understand virtuous strength of intention as an intention that is not involved in the free adoption of virtuous maxims, we would sidestep the very essence of virtue. Nothing and no one can constrain us to determine our choice by the pure incentive, understood as "the internal determination" of our will (MM 6: 380): neither our own inclinations nor someone else can motivate us to act morally. Even we ourselves cannot do this by adopting moral maxims once and for all. In ever-new situations, we must exercise our capacity for self-control to freely adopt our own moral maxims. It is in this way that we continually acquire moral strength and make internal lawgiving possible.

If we were to hold that strength of intention merely concerns an intention to follow our established maxims or to realize moral ends, we would therefore lose a useful tool for explaining why the ends that an agent intends are crucial to the fulfilment of duties of virtue but not to the fulfilment of duties of right. Of course, we would

not want to deny that intending an end is necessary for the performance of actions by which we fulfil duties of right. Yet with regard to duties of right it does not matter whether the end that one intends is moral or whether one's maxim is genuinely moral. In contrast, the way in which we determine our faculty of choice to perform a given action is crucial to the fulfilment of duties of virtue.[14]

Kant scholars who hold that virtue as moral strength instead presupposes that the activity of prescribing ourselves moral maxims has been completed may object that my argument that virtue cannot merely be a strength of intention at the level of following established maxims is not so relevant after all; virtue as moral strength, they may argue, is simply the mental state in which the process of maxim adoption results, or its 'final product'. On the face of it, some of Kant's claims seem to support this objection. By arguing that virtue is moral strength, Kant sometimes merely seems to have in mind a state in which we have already mastered our inner obstacles to morality. This occurs, for instance, when he claims that virtue is "the product of pure practical reason" (MM 6: 477).

Nevertheless, a proper understanding of Kant's use of the term "product" in this context preserves the relevance of my point about moral strength by showing that moral strength, or virtue, can never be a mere 'final product'. Because of the freedom necessarily involved in internal lawgiving, becoming virtuous requires that we continuously exercise our capacity for self-control, i.e. that we acquire moral strength. As Kant emphasizes, as an ideal virtue is "always *in progress*" (MM 6: 409),[15] and moral strength is practical wisdom (MM 6: 406). This is why he is best read as suggesting that virtue is not only a product but also a capacity. Kant even defines virtue merely as a "moral capacity [*Vermögen*] to constrain oneself" (MM 6: 394).[16] The underlying idea seems to be that all of us have the mere capacity for virtue, understood as the innate capacity for self-control, but that we also have a duty to *constantly* develop this capacity through its free exercise. Virtue as moral strength is then rather a kind of 'product-in-the-making', which in a certain sense always involves a 'not-necessarily-realized' capacity for self-control. Rather than simply being a 'final product' of maxim adoption, moral strength is also necessary for the very process of *becoming* morally motivated by adopting moral maxims of virtue.

14 For instance, if one is to fulfil the duty of beneficence, one must help others by making their happiness one's own end.

15 See also: MM 6: 383, 6: 396, 6: 434n and C1 A 596/B 597.

16 He also states that virtue "itself, or a possession of it, is not a duty" (MM 6: 405).

B. *The Intention That Is Constitutive of Moral Maxims of Virtue*

The argument above tells us that the strength of intention that characterizes virtue must somehow be involved in the process of adopting moral maxims. It is not yet clear, however, how this intention is to be understood and why its strength is necessary for the adoption of moral maxims of virtue. Some Kant scholars may shy away from the view that moral strength is necessary for the adoption of moral maxims, or may even argue against this claim, because they believe that it commits us to the view that in performing the universalization test agents must first acquire moral strength by actually overcoming our own psychological obstacles. Indeed, Kant seems to be at pains to reject this view.

But how are we then to understand the *strength of intention,* which is constitutive of virtue (MM 6: 390)? By the strength of soul (*Stärke der Seele*), as Kant explains, we generally mean:

> [S]trength of intention [*Stärke des Vorsatzes*] in a human being as a being endowed with freedom, hence his strength insofar as he is in control of himself […] and so in the state of *health* proper to a human being". (MM 6: 384)

In all likelihood, this strength is meant to involve the elementary form of self-control, which moral strength presupposes and which is required is one is to maintain sound mental (and even physical) health.[17] For instance, Kant held that ill (*krankhafte*) feelings can be mastered merely by a firm intention (*festen Vorsatz*) (C 7: 98; 7: 103), and that even cases of gout can be gradually cured by a firm intention (*Festigkeit des Vorsatzes*) to divert one's attention or to "abstract from" the pain (C 7: 107).[18]

Kant here primarily seems to have in mind the strength of a pure moral intention, for he continues by arguing that it is improper to ask whether great crimes require more strength of soul than virtues do (MM 6: 384).[19] On Kant's view, moral strength characterizes the states in which we have control over our desires and can freely use our capacities, whereas the person committing a crime is a plaything of his natural impulses even if there is a certain sense in which he controls himself to form and follow certain rules. The main problem is that various sensible influences still hold sway over that person's way of thinking, so that he still does not *freely* employ his reasoning capacity. As Kant explains: "the basis of great crimes is merely the force of inclinations that *weaken* reason, which proves no strength of soul" (MM 6: 384). It follows that even if an agent has a firm intention to follow his own rules, he still might be said to lack moral

17 I draw here on the discussion of this form of self-control provided in the previous chapter.

18 See also C 7: 111.

19 Cf. MM 6: 393.

strength because the rules that he gives to himself, or his maxims, are based on inclinations – he still does not seem to use his reasoning capacity independently of sensible influences. And he therefore fails to adopt genuinely moral maxims.

In the *Groundwork* (4: 398), Kant confirms this connection between moral strength and maxims by helpfully pointing to the moral *content* of maxims:

> if an unfortunate man, strong of soul [*stark an Seele*] and more indignant about his fate than despondent or dejected, wishes for death and yet preserves his life without loving it, not from inclination or fear, but from duty [*aus Pflicht*], then his maxim has moral content [*moralischen Gehalt*].

Despite his powerful aversion to life, this man shows moral strength by deciding to preserve his life by being motivated by the representation of duty alone. This is why his maxim can probably be said to have "pure moral content [*reiner moralischer Gehalt*]" (MM 6: 393), or to be genuinely moral.

However, this telling example need not lead us to the conclusion that Kant thought that someone who loves life does not need moral strength in order to adopt moral maxims. Since we can only measure strength by the magnitude of the obstacles it can overcome (MM 6: 397), we judge the man with a moral maxim who hates his life as being stronger than the man with a moral maxim who loves his life. Yet, the latter also needs moral strength in order to adopt his maxim because his "immediate inclination to life" cannot stand for the moral content of his maxim. This inclination still seems to be an obstacle that he must overcome if he is to adopt a genuinely moral maxim: if he is to act from duty, he must "abstract from" or set aside all "impure" incentives.

As Kant remarks, the strength of the moral law consists in its being recognized and presented in its purity (MM 6: 217). Accordingly, if we are to incorporate the moral law in our maxims as a pure and self-sufficient incentive, we ought to acquire moral strength by properly exercising our capacity for self-control in order to set aside all our inclinations. Together with the previously discussed passages, this point suggests that moral strength is necessary for the adoption of maxims with moral content – that is, for the adoption of maxims with the pure incentive, which is sufficiently strong to determine choice to an action.

Given Kant's overall emphasis on the *form* of maxims and the universalization test, discussions regarding the *content* of our maxims may appear irrelevant. Along these lines, one may also object that my claim about moral strength's being crucial for such content is, at best, irrelevant to the process of moral maxim adoption.

But Kant claims neither that our maxims lack content nor that their content is irrelevant. He relatedly argues that incentives are the "*matter*" of our maxims and that their form is the morally proper order of these incentives (R 6: 36). Furthermore,

when he argues in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (6: 376–7) that we should begin with "the form of the will, the *law*, in order to determine duties" rather than "the matter of the will, the end", he simply seems to be claiming that the matter should be conditioned by the form.[20] Even more, Kant explains that every maxim of action "contains an end [Zweck]", or "the matter of choice [*Materie der Willkür*]", by suggesting that maxims of virtue are maxims of ends (MM 6: 395; 6: 389).

It is important to note in this regard that an end is not simply an action but rather its intended effect (*Wirkung*) (G 4: 427–8): it is an aim we intend to realize through the performance of a particular action. Consequently, the strength of intention that characterizes virtue cannot simply be the strength of an intention to perform a particular action. The intention the strength of which is properly called virtue must also be an intention by which we set ourselves a particular *moral end* that motivates us to perform a morally correct action. As such, this intention is constitutive of our virtuous maxims of ends. If our virtuous maxims are to guide our actions in practice, they must involve this kind of intention. Otherwise, we would not be motivated by the "pure" moral incentive to perform an action – our maxims would lack moral content.

If morally worthy action is to be possible, we must *take an interest in ends*.[21] In order to ground our particular maxims on a pure interest in ends, our "lawgiving reason" sets moral ends "against the ends of inclinations", or independently of them – that is, *a priori* (MM 6: 381).[22] The activity of intending moral ends is then something that our lawgiving reason does, and this activity must involve a continuous effort of putting aside all sensible impressions. Intending a particular moral end must involve the activity of "abstracting from" all sensible impressions – it requires that we acquire moral strength by properly excising our capacity for self-control, such that we avoid adopting maxims for the sake of the ends to which our inclinations tempt us in a given situation.

On this basis, we can argue that moral strength is required if we are to secure the purity of the subjective motivating ground of our maxims in new situations. As Kant argues: a maxim is a "rule that the agent himself makes his principle on subjective grounds [*aus subjectiven Gründen*]" (MM 6: 225). This subjective ground makes our maxims, as our *subjective* principles of acting, different from objective principles – practical laws or imperatives.[23] Our maxims are based on "subjective causes [*subjectiven Ursachen*]", and they "do not of themselves conform with these objective principles" (MM 6: 214).

20 Kant's notion of an end is very closely tied to his notion of an incentive.

21 Kant is even arguing that pure practical reason is a faculty of ends and that our reason is practical because it takes an interest in ends (MM 6: 395).

22 This reading implies not that we should somehow get rid of the ends we naturally have but that we should disregard these ends by subordinating them to the ends we ought to have if we really are to act virtuously.

23 See for example C2 5: 19–20.

The objective principles can serve us "subjectively as the practical principles" only if reason actually gains control over the faculty of desire (G 4: 401n). Where one does not properly exercise the capacity for self-control, one's self-imposed rules cannot function as subjectively practical, volitional principles that actually motivate one to act morally. Acquiring moral strength in ever-new situations can be conceived as a necessary, continuous activity by which we reassess our incentives and thus purify the subjective motivating ground of our particular maxims.

The point that moral strength is necessary for this activity does not necessarily commit us to the claim that one who has yet to acquire moral strength cannot check whether the moral imperative "holds objectively" for him by subjecting one of his maxims to the universalization test (MM 6: 225). Moral agents of all stripes can always check in advance whether a maxim would qualify as universal law. On its own, following the universalization procedure can tell us which maxims of actions generally are duties.[24] This purely cognitive, theoretical basis of our maxims does not depend on our constantly acquiring moral strength by properly exercising our capacity for self-control.

But since our maxims are our own *subjective volitional* principles, which must be made on subjective grounds, we must *also* make the categorical imperative "subjectively practical". As Kant explains: without incentives, moral laws are grounds of appraisal that are not at the same time "subjectively practical" (LM 28: 317).[25] We seem to make moral laws "subjectively practical" by setting ourselves particular moral ends, or by *actually* determining our choices by the pure moral incentive.[26] This must be done in a given situation and requires that we acquire moral strength. The subjective, motivating ground of our maxims must be renewed in different situations.

This interpretation of moral strength also finds support in Kant's description of how we acquire moral strength:

> For while the capacity (*facultas*) to overcome all sensible impulses can and must be simply *presupposed* in man on account of his freedom, yet this capacity as *strength* (*robur*) is something he must acquire through [a process in which] by contemplation [*Betrachtung*] (*contemplatione*) of the dignity of the pure moral law in us, the moral *incentive* [*Triebfeder*] (the thought of the law)

24 This corresponds to Kant's first element of lawgiving: a law, which "makes an action a duty" by representing it as "*objectively* necessary" (MM 6: 218).

25 He also makes this point by using the conceptual pair "objectively necessitating" and "subjectively necessitating" (LM 28: 258)

26 This corresponds to the second element of lawgiving that Kant views as being required for actual self-determination: an incentive (MM 6: 218).

> is elevated [*erhoben*], but at the same time also through exercise [*zugleich aber auch durch Übung*] (*exercitio*). (MM 6: 397; translation modified)

Kant is first arguing here that we acquire moral strength via the proper exercise of our capacity for self-control. He then continues by explaining that it is through contemplation, but at the same time though the exercise of our capacity for self-control, that we acquire moral strength or make the moral law a self-sufficient moral incentive that actually moves us to perform a certain action. We do so by properly incorporating the incentive of the moral law into our maxims, or by "freely" adopting our maxims of virtue. This is how we seem to "elevate" our thought of duty, or the moral incentive.

This interpretation highlights the points at which my account departs from Grenberg's. On my view, as our way of acquiring moral strength, contemplation cannot be reduced to mere awareness of the categorical nature of the moral law: "the realization of inner freedom" must involve more than keen "attentiveness" to the moral law, which is meant to happen before we adopt a maxim. If it is to suffice as a characterization of Kantian moral strength, such an awareness or "attentiveness" must be conceived as an activity with a more dynamic and active aspect: it must go hand in hand both with the activity of developing our capacity for self-control over time and with the activity of incorporating "the law in its purity" into our maxims (MM 6: 217).

Furthermore, if contemplation is to be understood as a kind of "attentiveness" to the moral law, as Grenberg proposes, then it cannot be the sort of attention that we naturally pay to sensible objects. Contemplation of the dignity of the *pure* moral law can only be a kind of (more complex) "attentiveness" to the moral law that we acquire by diverting attention away from our inclinations and by focusing on the moral ends that maxims of virtue contain.[27] This is how reason can "take an interest" in moral ends in practice.[28]

Finally, I am happy to agree with Grenberg that we acquire moral strength through self-constraint (which occurs via *moral feeling*), but only if this self-constraining activity is meant to happen through the adoption of moral maxims. Kant argues that moral feeling is "respect [*Achtung*]" for the moral law "in its subjective aspect", which is "identical with consciousness of one's duty" (MM 6: 464). A person who does not cultivate moral feeling therefore knows what duties generally are, but he is not aware of these as *his own* duties: his mind remains unaffected by the concepts of duty, or he remains unaware of the constraint they impose on him (MM 6: 399). As Kant suggests: our own concept of duty is "*constraint* to an end adopted reluctantly" (MM 6: 386), and

27 Note that a rich philosophical tradition confirms the intimate relationship between intention and attention.

28 I draw here on my discussion of Kant's view of the relation between abstraction, attention and interest provided in the previous chapter.

it is through moral feeling that "one makes one's object every particular end that is also a duty" (MM 6: 387). If we could not cultivate moral feeling, we would not be able to constrain ourselves to adopt *moral ends*, i.e. we would fail to accept that the constraint present in the concept of duty really held for us. On my reading offered in *Chapters 2* and *5*, we accept this constraint by adopting moral maxims on which we really act; moral feeling enables the *actual* determination of choice by the moral law.

Further analysis of the connection between moral ends, moral feeling, and the intention the strength of which Kant calls virtue helps us better understand both the nature of this intention and its role in the process of maxim adoption.

On Kant's view, the end of moral perfection, as one of the moral ends that we ought to set ourselves, consists in purity of moral disposition. He states that the purest virtuous disposition is "inner morally practical perfection" (MM 6: 387) and that moral perfection "consists subjectively in the *purity* (*puritas moralis*) of one's disposition to duty [*in der Lauterkeit (puritas moralis) der Pflichtgesinnung*], namely in the law being itself alone the incentive, even without the admixture of aims [*Absichten*] derived from sensibility" (MM 6: 446). A virtuous moral intention must be an intention by which we set the end of moral perfection, and we can strengthen this intention by abstracting from sensible impressions.

It is, then, through the activity of acquiring moral strength that we acquire a virtuous disposition or moral perfection. Kant claims that the duty to increase one's own moral perfection includes "the cultivation of one's will (moral way of thinking) [*seines Willens (sittlicher Denkungsart)*]" (MM 6: 387; translation modified), and that we have a duty to carry the cultivation of our will "up to the purest virtuous disposition, in which the law becomes also the incentive to his actions that conform with duty and he obeys the law from duty" (MM 6: 387). Acquiring a virtuous disposition therefore actually consists in cultivating our will (or our moral way of thinking) by adopting the maxims in which the pure moral law becomes an incentive for us.

Importantly, Kant also suggests that moral feeling is this pure virtuous disposition (MM 6: 387). By setting ourselves the cultivation of moral feeling as an end, we intend to determine our choice by the thought of the moral law alone. Moral feeling is the subjective motivating ground of our maxims, which we cultivate through adopting particular moral maxims of virtue.

By pointing to this subjective ground of our maxims, the above analysis makes it possible to consistently argue that moral strength also plays an important role in the process of adopting moral maxims of virtue: it is due to moral strength that the categorical imperative becomes "subjectively practical" for us. This is how we make the moral law a powerful, self-sufficient incentive in ever-new situations. Hence, we need not argue that following the universalization procedure requires that we actually have our inclinations under our control, but we can still claim that we always have a duty to

acquire the strength of the intention that is constitutive of our virtuous maxims of ends. Without moral strength, our moral maxims would not be our own volitional principles – principles that actually guide and motivate our actions in practice.

3.4 Conclusion

The treatment of moral strength as a proper exercise of our capacity for self-control has shown that Kantian moral strength is necessary not only when it comes to compelling ourselves to realize the moral ends contained in our moral maxims but also when it comes to setting ourselves these ends in the process of maxim adoption. Consequently, the intention the strength of which is constitutive of virtue cannot be a mere intention to realize already-adopted moral ends, but it must also be the intention by which we set ourselves particular moral ends. We acquire this strength of intention by exercising our capacity for abstraction, or by putting aside the influence of sensible impressions on our minds in ever-new situations. This is how we manage to deal with the temptation to base our maxims on the ends of inclinations.

This reading can capture the active and dynamic aspect of Kantian moral strength. It can explain why Kant speaks of the moral strength of the human will and maxims, and it can accommodate Kant's insistence that virtue cannot be a kind of unfree skill or habit because its maxims must be freely adopted in new situations.